



THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

APRIL 7, 2019

JOHN 12: 1-8

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you,^[c] but you will not always have me.

- I had a heck of a time two weeks ago when Deb and Laynie flew to Orange Beach, Alabama.
- The day they were set to leave, Deb came up to my office at home and sat down, "the microwave just blew up."
- I said, "This week is going to be a disaster."
- My schedule here at church was packed. The week included meeting with one of the bishop's assistants. Over beers. But still. Driving with Paul Bell, Tim Wach, and Lennie Jansen to Fun Services in Jeannette to plan our Carnival in August. Let's just say what happens in Jeannette stays in Jeannette....
- There was finalizing the newsletter, planning Holy Week and Easter with Ed. All my regular appointments and some additional meetings. Coordinating the delivery of two pianos we found at bargain prices and the removal of three broken-down pianos. There were my taxes which had been pushed to the back burner. And, I had primary care for my mother-in-law recovering from back surgery.

- Oh yeah! And since we were going to Bloomington, Illinois to see clients last week, I had two sermons to write.
- Wednesday night I misplaced my key fob. Not finding it until Friday morning, which was the morning Hana, our Maltese, pulled my hearing aids off the nightstand and ate the rubber tips and wires. After relieving herself on our very white rug in the room that leads upstairs to my office.
- Deb could not get home soon enough....
- Now I had been walking around with this gospel story in my head and I connected it and my week with Stephen Covey's first principle from his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*: **KEEP FIRST THINGS FIRST**.
- For example, I suddenly could have placed "get a new microwave" at the top of my list: after all, how am I going to eat? I need to take care of this!
- Forgetting, of course, that I can barely work a microwave, let alone take out the old one and install a new one.
- Or I could have said to Paul, Tim, and Lennie: "My week is too packed to drive an hour to talk about a Carnival, even though that would violate one of the principles I've been teaching our Leaders: that we need to plan six months out for a major event."
- **KEEP FIRST THINGS FIRST.**
- Cancel the meeting with the bishop's assistant? But wait, it's over beers: **KEEP FIRST THINGS FIRST . . .**
- I see this same struggle in the Gospel. How to keep first things first.
- Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem, six days prior to the events that will lead to his death.
- He is visiting the home of Martha and Mary, whose brother Lazarus, Jesus raised from the dead.

- There is a dinner in his honor and Mary is serving.
- Now this is the grumbling Martha, whose priority always seems to be the kitchen. And that's alright. We all gotta eat. But recall the last time Jesus was with Martha and Mary. Martha got all bent out of shape because Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus, learning from him in a way that was reserved only for men. This is certainly first things first. Creating a new paradigm: whether male or female: **DEEPEN SPIRITUAL AWARENESS**. But Martha wants help getting the biscuits out of the oven and setting the table.
- Wanting to make second and third things first.
- At the end of the story is Judas. And he's all put out because Mary has used some money for expensive nard with which to anoint Jesus. Judas complains that the money could be put to better use in feeding the poor....
- **THIS IS A CON JOB**. Not only does he not care for the poor, but Judas has been stealing money from Jesus' crew.
- What is this? Putting egocentric and criminal things first! How messed up is this?
- But in the center of the story is Mary offering devotion and adoration to Jesus Christ.
- The word Christ, related to Messiah, meaning *the anointed one*. So, Mary is enacting who Jesus is: the Anointed One of God.
- **KEEPING FIRST THINGS FIRST.**
- On either side of the enactment of First Things First, we have Martha, the grumbler, worried about getting food on the table. And we have Judas, ostensibly concerned for the poor, but actually manipulating both people and money.
- Things get whacked when first things don't remain first....
- Way back when, at my first meeting with the Congregational Council, I asked for each person's view of CLC.

- Steve Slepecki said, “We know how to be in the neighborhood for good, but we don’t know how to be in our Church for good.”
- Steve was suggesting that first things were no longer first.
- **The Church is first the Church at worship**, the gathered faith community, sitting at the feet of Jesus Christ, learning from the word of God, adoring the crucified and risen Christ. Partaking of his body and blood. Connecting with God and one another in this space.
- If first things do not remain first, we are reduced to a glorified social service agency.
- And, without first things first, we will grumble like Martha, because we’re relying on our own egocentric energy and not the energizing mercy, compassion, and grace of Jesus Christ.
- One way to think about this is: **DON’T PRIORITIZE YOUR SCHEDULE. SCHEDULE YOUR PRIORITIES.**
- And what is a guideline for scheduling your priorities?
- Relationally, it is God—self—spouse—children—family—friends—wider community. Within that framework we have to figure out where our work fits in.
- This central image in our gospel story guides us. Mary, who has already chosen learning from Jesus over working in the kitchen, now chooses to connect with Jesus by anointing his feet. Without maintaining this connection, our priorities become a shambles.
- Luther used to pray for a few hours each morning because of **all that he had to do that day.**
- So, we all have to figure out how we stay connected—in heart, mind, spirit, soul—to Christ. Paul called this putting on the mind of Christ.
- Certainly, worship can be central. And, we create opportunities such as Dr. Owens class on Christian Meditation or my class on Centering Prayer as ways to keep first things first. We’ll continue to build on ways for you to deepen in being connected to spiritual reality.

- **FIRST THINGS FIRST.**

- Then we must care for our own lives. When we fly, what are the instructions we all get from the flight attendant? In case of emergency, put on your oxygen mask first. You cannot help anyone else unless you first take care of your needs.
- There is a spiritual discipline called detachment that the church has largely forgotten. Detachment does not mean being disinterested. Detachment does not mean not caring. Detachment is taking care of yourself first and letting others take responsibility for their actions without trying to save them.
- Again, many of us have been trained, often by the Church, to take care of other people before we take care of ourselves. As if taking care of ourselves is selfish or self-centered. If you don't take care of yourself, who is going to? We can get enmeshed in other peoples' problems rather than solving our own. Looking outward where we get involved in helping other people while we lose our way.

KEEP FIRST THINGS FIRST.

- God, self, and then spouse, children, and family.
- Mother Teresa was asked how to love as she loved. And she responded, "Love those closest to you first."
- God, self, spouse, children, family....
- I provided this list of spiritual priorities in a sermon when I was Interim Pastor at St. John, Carnegie.
- A woman was upset with me after the service, adamantly disagreeing with the list. When I asked her to tell me why, it turns out she was upset because she had set aside her husband, her grown children, the church, and her own life to take care of a family member for two years. And she was now upset because, when she needed help, this family member was not helping her.
- Go figure....

- My list suggested that perhaps she had had her priorities out of whack and had paid a price she didn't want to now face.
- Things go haywire when first things do not remain first.
- Another example would be the guy who brought home three equally attractive, bright, and accomplished women to meet his mother. He told his mother that, at the end of the evening, he wanted her to select the one he wanted to marry.
- The five of them had a great evening over dinner and conversation. Then, after he returned from taking them home, he asked his mother which one he wanted to marry.
- She made the correct choice and he asked how she knew.
- "I couldn't stand her."
- Many couples I have had in therapy create tension and problems in their marriages because one partner still is tied to their birth family. Or the son is still way too close to his mother. Or the daughter spends inordinate amounts of time with her parents and siblings.
- We mess things up when first things do not remain first.
- Let's go back to grumbling Martha for a moment. Both my professions, Pastor and Psychotherapist, have fairly high rates of burnout.
- I'm still burning pretty bright for an old man.
- Why?
- Over the years, countless clients would want me to solve their problems, give them the right answer, tell them what they should do.
- I refused to take responsibility for anyone's life. If someone wanted to keep dating men who were losers, then eventually we would talk about her pattern of picking duds. But what was I supposed to do? Chaperone her dates? Provide a screening service for interested men?

- I refused to buy into the notion that i was somehow responsible for healing anyone. Above my pay grade.
- I can provide a healing environment. I can help a person uncover destructive patterns. I can be a guide gently pointing them in the direction of better choices.
- But at the end of each session, I have to let go and allow each person to go out into the world and make their choices, for good or ill.
- And I always loved my practice. Tired, yes, but no burnout.
- The psyche, soul or holy spirit, the universe, however you want to think about it, is responsible for anything good happening....
- So, let's go back to where I started. My week of wonder and joy when Deb was on the beach.
- Another saying of Stephen Covey applies: **There are only three constants in life—change, choice, and principles.**
- There was change that week that had to be managed: Deb gone, smoking microwave, taking over care of my mother-in-law, hearing aids eaten. Meeting with the bishop's assistant. Over beers....
- Just goes to show not all change is bad.
- Choice: what do to? How to do it? What to do first, second, third, and so on. What not to do. That microwave was still dead when Deb returned. And what not to get pulled into doing by everyone around me and their priorities for me.
- And then principles.
- **KEEP FIRST THINGS FIRST.**
- Want a life that makes sense, that goes as well as it can, that has a sense of well-being?
- **KEEP FIRST THINGS FIRST:** the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Rock, the True Vine, the Living Water.

- Plug into the light shining all around you.
- Find the Bread of Life in the world around you and eat it every day.
- Acknowledge the Rock under your feet.
- Recognize your attachment to the Vine.
- Tap into the Living Water.
- **FIRST THINGS FIRST.**

SONG: **WATER WHEN THE WELL RUNS DRY** BY BUDDY MILLER